

Better Together – The Power of Belonging

Paper for the ICSEI Vancouver Congress January 2009 and the NPBS Seminar May 2009

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At times it is difficult to hang onto the personal values and beliefs that lead one into the teaching profession, as they tend to get lost in the day-to-day worries and tasks of the profession. Teachers develop routines and behaviors that are self-protective – they have proven to “work”, are implemented without engagement and are automatic. These behaviors need to be changed because although they are comfortable for teachers, they frequently do not move the learning in the classroom forward. When the teacher becomes “stuck” in habits, the learning in the classroom is stuck. This paper will examine how teachers at one school in central British Columbia were able to interrupt and change their thought processes and make significant changes in teaching practices. These changes lead to improved student learning and sense of self worth through the implementation of formative assessment strategies as presented by British Columbia’s Network of Performance Based Schools.

Most teachers believe it is important for students to achieve well for all the reasons that Dylan Wiliam (2008) states, “increased lifetime salary, improved health, longer life” for individuals and for society, “lower criminal costs, lower health-care costs and increased economic growth” (p. 183). Teachers find it difficult to shift our thinking from being focused on student learning to being focused on teacher learning in order to make these changes happen. Years of training and modeled examples of focusing on completed tasks and products as well as an overwhelming onslaught of policies and prescribed workshops have interfered with teachers examining the processes of teacher learning individually.

In the book, *Improving Schools through Teacher Leadership*, Harris and Muijs quote Harris (2002a): “ there are four discernible and discrete dimensions of the teacher leadership role” (p. 23). Lieberman (2000) states the problem, “Teachers are ‘developed’ by ‘experts’ rather than participating in their own development” (p. 221). In this paper I will argue that teachers at Glenview Elementary School have undertaken each aspect of Harris’ four dimensions of teacher leadership (undertaking brokering, participative, mediating and forging close relationships roles) and have responded to the learning needs of teachers and students.

Ten years ago and well into my teaching career, I began to experience feelings of unease and I knew that I was not alone in feeling alienated from the teaching profession. I found that teaching was no longer personally satisfying; the vision of enriching the learning of my students was overcome by vague feelings that I was not doing my job well. Those feelings were growing stronger each passing month and I recognized them but did not address the professional ennui that was enveloping me. Eight years ago, I began to search for answers. I returned to university, hoping that my own academic growth would somehow fulfill the void I was experiencing in the classroom. I did improve in some of my teaching techniques, but in general the quality of learning in my classroom did not improve. However, I learned that discussing professional practices within a community of shared values and visions made me feel somewhat more satisfied.

I continued my search. I knew I was performing adequately, but I had not yet encountered teacher inquiry and I did not know the powerful revitalization that teacher action research would have on my enthusiasm for learning. My passion for teaching was renewed when I began investigating the effective teaching of metacognitive strategies in

literacy. I read extensively, and became familiar with Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmerman's work, followed by an immersion into Harvey and Goudvais and furthered my journey with texts by Tanny McGregor and Debbie Miller. My quest became the journey of other members of the Glenview teaching staff as we became curious about students' increased abilities.

Over the past five years we have developed a series of inquiries, each one sustaining and furthering our deep learning. Our staff had commonalities, we had the similar experience of teaching context and a strong and consistent focus on teaching and improvement but we had not shared our thinking nor begun to work collaboratively. Once we began to talk, we were amazed at the similarities of our experiences and began developing first partnerships, and then a community that allowed us to explore both individual and group learning. The more we talked as a staff, the more consistently similar our teaching practices became.

Although we were improving the quality of teaching in the school, the improvement of learning was not paralleling our perception of overall teaching improvement and that led us to our first shared inquiry with the NPBS – if we are getting better at teaching, why aren't the students getting incrementally better at learning? We were confirming what we had already experienced in our teaching careers, the more we examined our practices, the more we need to examine our practices – we were responding to what we were seeing happening. We knew that there was a missing factor. Our discussions were framed by our assessment of what was happening in our classrooms. We were purposely improving our own performances, how could we improve the performances of our students?

We were implementing Harris' first dimension,

The way in which teachers translate the principles of school improvement into the practices of individual classrooms. This *brokering* role remains a central responsibility for the teacher as leader. It ensures that links within schools are secure and that opportunities for meaningful development among teachers are maximized (p.23).

The teachers were developing inquiries beyond the school focused inquiry as we responded to the evidence being shown in our classrooms and in assessment and data gathered. We began reflecting more about evaluation and responding to our students' learning. As teachers shared ideas and learning we were building social capacity in trusting relationships. There was enthusiastic support for our learning in our school building but an uncertainty about what to do. We did not have the expertise we needed to move ourselves forward. We needed to know what other teacher learners were doing. We needed a more elaborate support system – we no longer were interested in learning the latest educational strategies, we wanted to explicitly change the way we were teaching. We had started our learning journey; we had questions that we wanted answered. Thomas Hatch (2006) notes:

Building on Dewey's view that learning to teach is inseparable from learning to inquire, these efforts approach teaching as a complex intellectual endeavor that demands disciplinary expertise, a deep understanding of students, and sophisticated pedagogical skills. These efforts reflect the belief that the skills of the teacher are not innate capacities but abilities that need to be developed over time, in collaboration with others. In this view teachers are gaining new insights and ideas and learning all the time, advancing not only their own work but also the work of their colleagues and their disciplines (p. 11).

Our school became involved in the Network of Performance Based Schools. British Columbia's Network of Performance Based Schools (NPBS) was co-founded by Dr. Judy Halbert and Dr. Linda Kaser in January 2000. Kaser and Halbert's (2006) stated intent for founding the NPBS was to help teachers become learners and leaders, "the purposes of this network have remained constant since its inception - improving student learning

through the use of formative assessment, developing an inquiry mindset within and among participating schools, increasing professional and community confidence through transparent sharing of learning results, and supporting the professional growth of educators through a model of networked leadership” (p. 1). In addition one of the primary purposes of the NPBS is for adult educators to learn “with and from each other” on behalf of learners using the Four Big Ideas That Matter and Dylan Wiliam’s five formative assessment strategies (adapted into six by Kaser and Halbert).

With the guidance of the NPBS the teachers at Glenview became committed to engaging in their own learning. We made a commitment to study how our students learned and to become more involved in daily use of formative assessment strategies. Teachers became even more focused on the students, with the intent of improving our knowledge about individual student’s learning, as well as the learning of the class.

Continual assessment started taking place, not just of the students, but also of the way we were reacting to the students. Wait time was increased, not only to give students more opportunity to answer but to give teachers more time to process the information students were giving us - including what the students think, how they are thinking, what leads to the conclusions they make, what is a misconception and what knowledge do they verify in their oral answers.

The students were leading the teachers’ learning and the teachers learned to be in the moment, constantly moving our students’ learning forward. Teachers began adapting lessons based on the information being given by the students in the form of oral responses and completed applied tasks and projects. Students received feedback when they needed it, while the learning was taking place and teachers were observing the

learning, providing materials and adjusting both our own and students' thinking and work immediately.

Guided by the stewardship of the NPBS, Glenview Elementary School created opportunities for its teachers to learn from one another and we implemented another dimension stated by Harris and Muijs (2005):

A second dimension of the teacher leader role focuses upon *participative* leadership where all teachers feel part of the change or development and have a sense of ownership. Teacher leaders may assist other teachers to cohere around a particular development and to foster a more collaborative way of working (Blasé and Anderson 1995). They work with colleagues to shape school improvement efforts and take some lead in guiding teachers towards a collective goal (p. 24)

We began to understand that although meeting to discuss our students' work was moving us forward we were limited by our own experiences. The NPBS provided us with the opportunities to meet outside our school and discuss student work and formally present our experiences. They provided us with access to discussion groups, teacher learning circles, publications in journals, conferences and online events. The NPBS was modeling how to share our work. Teachers within our school began to make our work public in a variety of ways. The Network was helping us move individual teacher learning into a more public arena and by doing so provided a reciprocal arena in which we learned from others. The NPBS re-established the scholarship of teaching. Halbert and Kaser, through the NPBS, were providing the same access to the sharing of information that takes place in a university setting for classroom teachers. As well, the inquiry approach supported by the Network allowed Glenview staff to pursue a question that we were deeply committed to exploring as well as one that had a huge potential to be of interest to a wider audience. Lieberman (2000) states:

Unlike bureaucratic organizations, networks are organized around the interests

and needs of their participants, building agendas sensitive to their individual and collective development as educators. They can change quickly and invent new structures and activities that are responsive to their members (p. 221).

The Network of Performance Based Schools has changed learning at Glenview Elementary School. Everything we thought we knew about teaching has changed in the last four years because of becoming involved in the NPBS.

The co-founders of the NPBS are powerful teacher leaders, transformational visionaries who modeled how teacher thinking could change. Dr. Linda Kaser and Dr. Judy Halbert, when they established the NPBS, demonstrated that when the key resources are intelligence, creativity, and insight, teacher learning can move forward. The Network encourages teachers to develop a range of activities that can improve the quality of learning and provide a venue for the sharing of innovative ideas. Dr. Halbert and Dr. Kaser are successfully encouraging teachers to move their learning outside their school building into the broader school community.

The Network provided the vocabulary with which the teachers at my school could examine their thinking. Harris and Muijs' third dimension of teacher leadership is the *mediating* role, "teacher leaders are important sources of expertise and information. They are able to draw critically upon additional resources and expertise if required and to seek external assistance" (p. 24). We turned to the NPBS for support in our learning. Just as teaching metacognitive skill development provides the vocabulary for students to discuss their thinking; the NPBS provided the research ideas, vocabulary and the necessary background knowledge for the teachers at Glenview to examine our thinking. Teachers were able to begin to discuss our learning and inquiries with an established common language that allowed everyone access to our thinking using the non-threatening model

presented by Jan Robertson (2005).

With the acquisition of language came the ability to research the aspects of learning that are most important, those that reflect what is actually happening in our classrooms. With language came the ability to discuss our observations about what we were doing to support student learning and the means of making our teaching public. We could examine and exchange our ideas and theories with others. As reported in Lieberman (2000), McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) stated, “Teachers who were taking risks and were continually inventing new ways of working with their students were, at the same time, developing a positive learning community with their peers and creating norms of openness and collegueship” (p. 222).

The NPBS is making possible that which up to now was impossible – teaching in British Columbia is becoming public; teachers are examining and exchanging ideas with each other; they are learning from each other. The Network is creating a professional community in our profession that is unrivalled in Canada by “providing “the infrastructure for promoting innovation and for maximizing networking and collaboration both within and between schools” (Harris and Muijs, 2005, p. 126).

Through the NPBS’s provision of rigorously examined research papers and participation in learning community based discussions, Glenview teachers were able to begin reflecting upon and inquiring into our practices. Teachers were pursuing a shared purpose, to increase student learning and were driven by the responsibility for increasing the quality of our students’ learning. Lieberman’s (2000) example of Meier’s work (1992) describes the daily interaction between the teachers at our school,

At the very least, one must imagine schools in which teachers are in frequent conversation with each other about their work, have easy and necessary access to each other's classrooms, take it for granted that they should comment on each other's work, and have the time to develop common standards for student work (p. 222).

The learning that we are doing is not isolated to only the participants from our school.

The NPBS has created a learning community of teachers from all levels from

Kindergarten to Master's seminars, from teachers to administrators to policy makers.

Together we are examining work from around the world, focusing on the promising practices that will make a difference to our learners. Teachers at Glenview know that we are making a difference in the lives of our students and in ourselves by providing quality daily teaching in the classroom. Hatch (2006) suggests that teachers focus on "building on Dewey's view that learning to teach is inseparable from learning to inquire; these efforts approach teaching as a complex intellectual endeavor that demands disciplinary expertise, a deep understanding of students, and sophisticated pedagogical skills" (p. 11).

Hatch goes on to state:

These efforts reflect the belief that the skills of the teacher are not innate capacities but abilities that need to be developed over time, in collaboration with others. In this view, teachers are gaining new insights and ideas and learning all the time, advancing not only their own work but also the work of their colleagues and their disciplines (p.11).

As teachers at Glenview explored metacognitive skills we shared not only formally through the NPBS, but also through the informal networks created as well as through professional associations, mentorship relationships and informal networks. Formal meetings within the school were arranged through school district grants to meet regularly and share student work and to examine the differences that the use of explicit teaching of

skills made in student performance. As well we visited one another's classrooms and discussed successes and challenges. Classroom doors were beginning to open.

The teachers at Glenview Elementary School knew that we had to verbalize our beliefs about education and create a value system worth sharing. Staff members share Nel Noddings stated views in the Stanford Education Newsletter (1998) *and* believe wholeheartedly that: "We live in an interdependent society and one of our education aims is to prepare students for democratic citizenship" (p. 13). Like John Dewey (1902), Noddings wants students to be involved in the construction and measuring of their learning so that they can make meaning. Our learning community desires the same outcomes. Sharing our belief system helped us to build a vision. Once a common vision was established, teachers were more prepared to work together towards a common goal. Harris and Muijs' fourth and "possibly the most important dimension of the teacher leadership role is *forging close relationships* with individual teachers through which mutual learning takes place" (p. 24). Glenview Elementary School staff has established a community of respect and belonging that has enabled us to move forward.

We were able to recognize that one of the strengths of the Network of Performance Based Schools was the supportive infrastructure that allowed teachers to take risks. The caring that was demonstrated by the Network members was beyond interest – the Network wanted us to continue to sustain our growth but also cared about us, how we were doing and what we were feeling. We emulated that support within our school. And once teachers felt safe, we experienced the freedom to think, to explore our ideas, establish our inquiries and express our own views. We were given the opportunity to learn in the manner in which we wanted our students to learn. The NPBS was modeling

the support system for our formal leaders: “No serious change effort can be sustained without intellectual and emotional support for those doing the core work of learning and teaching – the learners and their teachers – and this core work must be supported by leaders at all levels” (Halbert and Kaser, 2006, p. 4).

Further, the NPBS helped the staff develop necessary skills to publicly acknowledge our work without searching for publicity. The NPBS has become a major conduit that provides opportunities for teachers to share. Lieberman (2000) states, “Enabling members to participate in creating and sustaining a group that advanced their professional identity, interests and learning released great power and energy.” The success of collaborative relationships within the Network creates synergy and the will to make teacher learning public, creating a learning cycle that increases the level of commitment of its members to each other.

The Network also provided coping skills - as teachers become public they became more and more aware that recognition and prestige is not always rewarded and that they need to develop skills and understandings that will allow them to cope with peer skepticism. The Network creates a shared concern for the welfare of the teachers while providing a safe place to develop the confidence to take risks exploring improvement. We experienced a real fear in undertaking change. What if the strategies work for others, but not for us? What if we could not meet the standards that we are setting for ourselves? Our reflections about teaching were not always of a positive nature; in fact some were harrowing as people thought about their commitment to teaching and the journey that we were about to embark upon. The NPBS supported us while we examined different practices; some that were in direct conflict with our currently held beliefs. Dr. Kaser and

Dr. Halbert presented and provided the theory and research behind the practices of teacher leadership and formative assessment strategies. Dr. Halbert and Dr. Kaser were the dynamic real life examples we needed to emulate to help us connect to the research theories. They encouraged the peer collaboration, problem solving and decision making processes that were an important part of our learning process. They encouraged us to apply our understandings about metacognition across the curriculum, sustaining the same language and thinking to give our students a common language to discuss their learning.

Over a period of four years teachers at Glenview tried to develop a better understanding of what we needed to do to help our students learn. We experimented with different teaching strategies, observed each other teaching, and read reference texts. We began to focus on learning, our own and our students. Glenview's teachers explored the role that both informal inquiry and scholarship played in our learning experiences. We developed our own understandings about the strategies we used; and critically examined strategies and co-constructed knowledge together. The teachers began to think about how to share and help colleagues apply those ideas and strategies.

Our experiences were demonstrating how teachers learn while teaching and the importance of inquiry in the process. We created opportunities to learn, based on advice and feedback from our peers. We made our developing insights about formative assessment strategies and metacognitive strategies public. We realized the benefits of helping other teachers and schools develop an understanding of school-wide inquiry projects. We developed an ability to examine the outcomes of processes and the application of strategies. We participated in the Network of Performance Based School meetings and shared narratives about our practices and our concerns – what was going

well and what was not successful; articulating and presenting what was being learned in informal groups and through the publication of papers.

Participating in the NPBS gives teachers the structures and encouragement for examining their practices. They link teachers to the knowledge of practicing teachers in many different contexts whose sharing of tacit knowledge and new insights can make the group learning explicit. The interactions at the NPBS meetings provides teachers an ability to share insights and practices and find out what happens when these insights and practices are adapted and applied in the work of others, thus moving us further along in our own inquiry. The Network supports the inquiries in a particular context, but with the recognition that they are providing support from what is known from other areas and research.

The staff at Glenview began to understand that learning is demonstrated when new knowledge, skills or behaviors are developed and used with some consistency. We needed the opportunities to sit back and reflect upon what was important – and then we started to feel good about our teaching skills and what was happening in our classrooms. Our focus has been reassigned from getting through each day in the classroom to focusing on values, the intent of our practice and the strategies that are being used.

Glenview staff deliberately included the six formative assessment strategies in our planning. Our daybook pages were re-structured to include aspects of the formative assessment strategies. We critically examined our interactions with our most vulnerable students and determined what we would do to move them further along. We knew we had to change the structures in which our students were working and we were committed to doing so. The use of the formative assessment strategies has deepened our

relationships with our students, and we are using powerful pedagogical strategies. Hatch (2008) suggests that the following are benefits when teachers learn to improve their practice:

New opportunities to represent practice; to establish occasions for sharing those representations; to create the deadlines, audiences, conversations and feedback that can reinforce and extend those exchanges; to connect those exchanges to formal opportunities to publish and present representations of teaching and learning for public consideration; and to foster the creation and influence of knowledge brokers – all these can help create an infrastructure for the examination of teaching and learning. These developments are crucial to fuel the creation and use of sophisticated representations of teaching and learning both online and off, and in turn, increased opportunities to exchange artifacts and representations can help to establish the incentives and connections needed to build the infrastructure for examining teaching and learning generally (p. 105-106).

Our previous classroom experiences have influenced our learning, as has our willingness to take responsibility for the learning of our students. The teachers in the school perceived that teacher reflections about classroom experiences were extremely important and were willing to commit time to pursue learning. As we became more interested in our inquiries, teachers accessed a variety of research materials that further supported our learning.

An important aspect of our learning was the need to adapt the practical knowledge and information of others to suit our context. Pre-service coursework did not prepare our new teachers for the specific teaching environment that they were entering, but observing experienced teachers and receiving support from within the school had a profound effect on structuring and shaping their learning. Whenever possible, new members of the profession were given extra release time and prepared materials that would help them design lessons to engage students in taking ownership of their learning. The context of

the school building can be limiting or expanding – staff at Glenview want to positively influence the extent to which new teachers can reflect on their practice.

The physical layout of the school can have an immense impact on adult learning. Like most teachers, it would be easy for Glenview’s staff to isolate ourselves in the classrooms. In order to overcome the limitations of the classroom experience, several teachers are working in teams, collapsing walls and working with large groups of students. This enables the partners to interact constantly and observe each other’s practices. As a result teachers working in teaching teams are able to learn while practicing in the context of our own classrooms. The school wide inquiry further creates a learning community. The school wide support allows teachers to increase contacts with colleagues by creating opportunities to share ideas. Generalizations about practice are beginning to emerge, as we observe our students traveling from year-to-year through different teachers and classrooms. Thomas Hatch quotes Hanson, 2001; March 1999; as observing that: “Beliefs, norms, rules and routines that shape the organizational culture influence the way in which teachers inquire into practice, interpret data and interact with others” (p.44).

The learning being done at Glenview is making its way out of the school. It is difficult to communicate clearly all the ways in which teacher learning is shared. There is a definite development of language as the terms for formative assessment and teacher led inquiry are explained and knowledge is built in others. Teachers at Glenview have been fortunate: principal support for emerging teacher leaders in the purchase of time and resources, as well as for inquiry, and the connection to the NPBS have created opportunities for developing relationships and making presentations beyond their school

context. This has allowed for the teachers to influence practice beyond their own building and have created inquiries for other teachers.

Teachers from the district and throughout the province have been to visit classrooms at Glenview. They come to observe, and are not given a package of materials to implement at their own school, but rather are encouraged to take with them whatever materials they wish to share from the classrooms. Practicing teachers modeling effective learning can make a difference. Schools sharing ideas freely will move others forward. The experience of examining their own teaching practice should not be unique – the system needs to recognize the complexity and sophistication of good teaching. The Glenview staff recognizes that we learn through sharing and we can have a positive influence on other teachers and the system when we share the results of our inquiries. If the staff at Glenview was not perceived to have credibility then colleagues would not have paid much attention to us. We have managed to develop expertise both inside and outside the classroom and have modeled credible inquiry for our colleagues. At the Penticton Summer Leadership Conference Dylan Wiliam (2008) stated, “Knowledge transfer can take place between teachers when one person’s tacit knowledge becomes another’s explicit knowledge. It’s generally easier to act our way into a new way of thinking rather than think our way into a new way of acting”.

Glenview teachers have taken Wiliam’s words to heart and have jumped into a new way of acting. Our actions are permeating the school district and the province. Two teachers have undertaken a Master’s Program at the University of Victoria that is closely affiliated with the NPBS. Students in our area involved in the Certificate of School Management and Leadership meet every second month to offer support to colleagues.

The Network and CSML meetings have evolved into a regular source of professional development for a number of teachers in the district. These are rigorous attempts to improve teacher learning and provide evidence for Renee Moore's statement in *Into the Classroom*:

Teacher research is not about looking for some great new way to teach: It is the prima ballerina at the bar; it is the concert pianist playing scales; it is the basketball star practicing lay-ups; it is digging deep in one's own backyard (p. 69).

The teachers at Glenview are learning as we teach full time. There are moments of feeling overwhelmed but we are there for each other. Most of the time all the teachers are engaged in very personal journeys, which we have shared with others in the hopes that William and Black's black box is beginning to be opened. Current methods of sharing classroom improvements are haphazard and focus on strategy instruction rather than teacher improvements. There are very few opportunities to build the kinds of knowledge that allow school staffs to make significant differences, and teacher expertise is a critically underused resource in improving schools. The model supported by the NPBS and being practiced in Glenview Elementary School is an effective way of realizing change. The learning environment in British Columbia's schools is built by practicing teachers. The Network of Performance Based Schools is helping change values and beliefs about teacher learning in British Columbia, regardless of the context and constraining adult learning environments. Katz and Earl (2007), refer to Timperley (2004) in the statement that the challenge lies in involving:

Reconceptualising and making changes to existing practice and structures, legitimating the change process, making the status quo more difficult to protect and offering opportunities for joint attention to issues that are larger than any one school could address alone" (p. 35).

James et. al, 2007 refer to Nonaka and Takeuchi, (1995) in describing teachers as moving from implicit to explicit knowledge in a series of cycles as individuals share their learning:

In the context of developing new practices for assessment for learning, this might explain how teachers, who have developed their own practices try to make them explicit enough to tell other teachers, who then take these explanations and try to develop them in their own practice until they in turn become part of their implicit knowledge (and ‘hidden from view’ as it were) (p. 19).

This statement provides support for the promise of the Network of Performance Based Schools.

The Network offers invaluable support for the teachers in British Columbia by providing a collaborative support system that enables learners to move forward by building capacity and support. Kaser and Halbert are agents of change, successfully providing British Columbia’s learning communities with the ability to examine beliefs and practices by providing research and theory for the mutual benefit of all members. Members of the network “participate in focused relationships for collaborative inquiry, they open themselves to new ideas and to challenging their views through interaction with others and with formal knowledge” (Katz and Earl 2007, p. 36). The Network of Performance Based Schools has realized this ideal for the teachers at Glenview Elementary School.

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